

Sue Kim  
The Greatest  
Korean American  
Story Never Told

The Authorized Biography  
of Sue Kim

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## DEDICATION

This book is for Anthony and Marianne Bonifazio, who had the courage and fortitude to share Sue's story with the rest of the world.



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## PREFACE

When Sook Ja Kim was four years old, sitting by the window on the third floor of her parent's thirteen-room mansion outside Seoul, she had no idea she would live through the capture and execution of one parent, the kidnapping and suicide of another. She couldn't have dreamed that poverty and near starvation would drive her and her siblings to perform for food, and that this talent would catapult her out of obscurity in Korea to the stage lights of Vegas by the age of nineteen. On that day, in the summer of 1943, she couldn't have foreseen the abuse and death of her closest sister nor the addiction and rehabilitation of brothers and relatives. Most of all, she had no concept of the Italian boy in New York, playing baseball on a dirty field in the Bronx, who she would meet, marry, and who would become the longest running casino boss in Las Vegas history. Together, they would shine as the most glamorous couple under the bright lights of the desert city for four decades and raise children and grandchildren, even as his occupation and her family threatened to tear it all apart. At that moment on that day, Sook Ja only knew stars existed in the sky, not on the stages around the world that was to be her destiny. For a few more hours, Sook Ja still had the pure, trusting, unconditional love of a sheltered child. They would be her last.

## Part 1: Childhood in Korea

1939-1959

The Kim home was in the Pil-Dong , an enviable neighborhood and popular summer resort destination south of Seoul, South Korea, located at the base of the famed Namsan Mountains. Sequestered within the undisturbed streams flowing from the mountainside, towering lacebark pines and thousand year old juniper trees, their bright green cauliflower-like blooms offered peace and protection to the wealthy and elite of the city. The shade of the trees were a gathering place for the high officers and royal families in the capital city and had been so for hundreds of years. With the Gyeongbokgung Palace on one side of the area and the revered Jongmyo shrine on the other, the cultural and political rulers gained good luck and preservation from the ritual ceremonies that had been performed since the 14<sup>th</sup> century. Down in the valley, the compacted homes of lesser royals co-mingled with numerous galleries and historical museums, both flanked by a multitude of performing arts stages. The area was the perfect region for the most famous composer in Korea, Hai Song Kim, and his actress and singer wife, Ran Yong Lee, to raise their children.

From one window in her corner bedroom, Sook Ja fantasized that the massive juniper trees were leaning over the tall fence and snatching a fish from the large rectangular pond. From another window, she watched a narrow stream running through the corner of the front yard, passing under the tall, wrought iron and timber gate surrounding the property. The stream made its way under the fence to the neighbor's property, feeding a tall, olive tree that sometimes dropped its fruit from its branches near the bench below.

The Kim home was built in the traditional Hanok style of the elite, its distinctive black tile Giwa roof sloped down to ends curved upward, shadowing a porch that extended ten feet around the entirety of the white exterior. The exterior blended brown, wooden beams with stone-block construction, accented with modern windows within sliding glass interior doors and a solid wood front door.

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The grounds had the heavy touch of Japanese culture, the invaders bringing with them peaceful influences of water affects, trees and sitting areas, a contradictory influence of their harsh military occupation.

As Sook Ja peered out the window, a ray of sun blinded her, and she strained with futility to grasp the *cheoma* at the edge of the curvy roof that would allow her to adjust the amount of sunlight coming through the slats. Hearing the laughs and shouts of her siblings in the nursery, Sook Ja slid open the wood framed *banji* door and left her room. Despite its glass construction, it slid easily and without a sound. Its glossy exterior was lubricated with bean oils and impervious to little fingerprints. She ran from her room down the long I-shaped hallway and into the nursery when a breeze from the open windows caught the cuff of her broad sleeves as if to silently push her into the large playroom. She slid between the two governesses, her older sister, a brother and younger sibling.

Craning her head out the nursery window, Sook Ja peered past the front courtyard, twice the size of the home, stretching more than one hundred feet past the inner courtyard on either side, and down to the main gate. She pushed up on the balls of her feet to see over the hedge of junipers that hid the fence and could almost make out the top rows of other black-tiles homes that lined the hillside down to the city in the distance.

“Get back,” commanded one of the governesses in her native tongue. Sook Ja ignored her. She was looking for her father. It was midday and he would be home shortly.

She watched the gate and the rising dust from the sputtering of the trolley cars in the distance, listening to the soft sounds of bicycle bells ringing and the honk of a horn. Now and then, a man on a bike would stop at the front entrance gate, ringing his bell until a manservant dressed in grey made his way down the long paved path, past the pillars, down six more marble steps to the front gate.

Sook Ja mentally cataloged the packages delivered by outsiders; sometimes it was an ornately wrapped box, other times baskets of food were also brought to the front, requiring the gatekeeper to yell for additional hands to help him unload the goods. The servants would wobble under their loads, turning from the main house to a detached building to the left and back. Entry through this sliding glass door to the detached building was reserved for close friends and family in addition to servants. It bespoke a special status to be closely regarded and familiar to come in unannounced. Only strangers or mere acquaintances used the front door of the main home.

Sook Ja maintained her post, resting her arms on the windowsill.

Directly below her in the main dance room she heard the shuffling of toes and imagined ballet dancers gliding across the marble floors. The sounds of stringed instruments floated through the open window as the members of her father's orchestra practiced in a room large enough to hold fifty. Cutting through the melody Sook Ja recognized her mother's soft, sweet voice. It was a love song about tragedy, although Sook Ja couldn't make out the words. So soothing was her voice that Sook Ja laid her head on her arms, happily listening to her mother, even though she had no idea the song told of a lover's death by suicide.

Sook Ja had the urge to visit her mother, but didn't want to leave the safety of the nursery until her father arrived.

The high ring of a distinctive three-tone bicycle bell caused Sook Ja to jump to her feet. Commotion occurred in three parts of the home: Sook Ja saw the gatekeeper rush out, pushing the protective barrier wide to allow a black limousine into the courtyard, her governess ordered her away from the window with far greater stridency, and her siblings increased their noise level.

"Now!" Commanded the governess. This time, Sook Ja did as she was told, knowing that to be seen from the outside of the home was to disrespect her family and anger her father. She waited until her older brother Young Jo was busy tormenting younger sister Ai-Ja, distracting one governess as the other governess held fussing baby Young Ill, then Sook Ja quietly moved out into the hallway. Her bare feet made no sound on the wood floor as she slipped down to the bottom of the stairs, hiding behind a large palm bush as her father emerged through the doorway.

As Hai Song Kim entered the home, he held a music score in one hand and a conducting rod in the other. His black suit, white tie and white bow tie were identical to the western magazine covers Sook Ja and her siblings found lying in the music room, and different from clothing worn by the servants. Hai Song was no more than a few strides into the home when he stopped dead, cocking his head, his eyelids fluttering slightly to make out the various sounds assaulting his senses. He raised his hand as though he were going to strike out and Sook Ja instinctively ducked lower, moving a large leaf in front of her face, waiting until he'd passed by.

Sook Ja ventured out from behind the palms, her thin frame easily shadowed by his tall, thick figure. Sook Ja kept pace behind him as he made his way down the long, wood-lined hallway, stopping at the first doorway. He slid the door open, entered and left the door open behind him, allowing Sook Ja to watch as he immediately began directing the dancers. He demanded their arms higher toward

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the sky, as if on the wings of a bird before dropping dramatically, bending knees and swooping back up like the famous blue crane.

Sook Ja absorbed his words with the same sense of awe and fear as the performers. He seemed to tower above everyone, including the other men. He unexpectedly turned, barely giving Sook Ja time to hide behind a bookcase as he passed by. She cautiously followed him as he entered the music room where the orchestra performed. He walked straight over to the horns and lifted a trombone right out of a middle-age player's hands, stopping the entire practice session.

"I was told you want a raise," her father said scornfully. "Listen to this." Hai lifted the instrument to his lips and proceeded to play the song that was being practiced, note perfect. The player shifted in his seat, sinking a bit in the chair as the last note ended. Sook Ja tried to discern if the man's face was white with fear or fury. "As long as I can play better than you, you get no raise. Stay or leave." Hai didn't wait for a response as he turned from the room.

Down the hall, a large group of performers sang, their voices growing louder as Sook Ja neared, once again following her father. She saw her mother standing beside a male vocalist, the pianist playing in the left corner of the room. Sook Ja found no fault as her mother and the man sang a refrain as the chorus harmonized in the background. Sook Ja's father walked between the two and the chorus, waving his hand to cut off the music. With a whip of his conductor's baton, he brushed the male soloist to the side. The music stopped, the voices cut off mid-sentence.

"Play," Hai commanded the pianist. On his cue, Ran Yong Lee, Sook Ja's mother, started singing, watching her husband intently. It was the song *Tears of the City* by Son Mu Kim, one of the most famous pieces in Korean history.

Hai's eyebrows arched as he raised and spread his arms, motioning for her to deepen her voice as she told the story of newfound love between a poor country boy and a wealthy young woman from the city. Up went his one arm on a pivotal note, and down went his fingertips as her voice played with the words like keys on a piano, emphasizing the joy of love and the pain of separation as their two worlds and cultures are challenged. Hai motioned for the male soloist to join, his powerful voice expressing the anguish of a disapproving family. Hai signaled the chorus to sing their parts as members of the poor village town where such a marriage would bring good luck to the entire town. The chorus pleads compassion from a disapproving father, a sad mother and a young girl in tormented love.

Abruptly, Hai ordered all the voices to cease except for Ran's, who sang of her broken heart, as the boy she hoped to marry is sent away from town, and she

is consigned to be with someone she doesn't love. As the last note died out, Sook Ja watched tears run down her mother's face, observing in silence with the rest of the room. Sook Ja had never heard her mother sing so beautifully, and she didn't understand why her mother looked so sad. After all, it was only a song.

Her father nodded tersely in an approval and left the room. He nearly ran into Sook Ja, who was still transfixed by seeing both her parents performing.

"Upstairs until after the show," he ordered Sook Ja, turning his back and moving to the adjacent practice room.

Sook Ja caught her mother's eye, and ran into her open arms for a quick hug before being escorted away by a governess. Back at her window perch, she waited until her father left for the theatre in his dark limousine, followed by the rest of the performers who took the trolley.

It was dark outside when Sook Ja heard the opening and shutting of doors, the servants yelling to one another that the master of the house would be home any moment with his company.

The Kim children were called to change for dinner. Sook Ja and her sisters removed the long, full trousers and hip-length jackets made of finely woven silk to the modern dress preferred by her parents. Sook Ja loved her western clothes of dresses with hats and black patent shoes, as well as the outfits her brothers wore of starched shirts and bow ties. They were so different from other children and even the servants, who wore the traditional *chogori* attire. Sook Ja lifted her arms up as the linen dress was slipped over her head. She stood still as the governess tied the bow on her chest, tugging the fabric tight under the arms.

Soon enough, the front doors opened and the quiet house was filled with loud laughter from chattering, excited voices. Sook Ja's mother requested the children, and the governess led the four down the stairs in a line to the great dining room. The floors radiated warmth underneath her feet, taking the chill of the evening breeze coming from the open windows. The Japanese had done away with many of the Korean traditions, but not the ancient Nodal floor system that kept the wood floors warm during cold winters and cool during the humid summers. Outside, a servant stoked a fire that warmed water, which was pumped to keep it circulating underneath the home.

"Number," her father said, ordering the children to line up.

Sook Ja took her place as third in line, and quietly stood with her siblings as



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her father walked from end to end, inspecting the children. Just this once she hoped to have dinner with her parents, but knew it was unlikely. After the formality of being presented was complete, they would be taken to the children's dining area to eat.

The massive dining room was full of members of the ruling party; powerful political figures who controlled Korea, all finding their places at the table. Sook Ja thought her mother looked like a princess in one of her plays. She stood straight, with her black hair parted in the middle, so smooth the light above gave it a glimmering sheen. It was held in place by a long golden pin with red and green jewels. It was a colorful contrast to her olive-green, form-fitting suit, expertly tailored around her twenty-one year old body.

Ran gave instructions to the servants, and ordered a last minute addition to the menu.

Sook Ja's mouth watered in anticipation of being served some of the vast amounts of food on long tables on either side of the room. Sweet soups made of vegetables and shellfish were next to *Sundubu jjigae*, a stew with soft tofu. The bitter aroma of *bulgogi*, with its cuts of marinated meat was next to *galbi* beef ribs. Of course, her mother's simple oysters with marinade would be on the table, and her father's Chunyoung, a cold noodle dish that she could eat at any time of the day or night. She remembered the recent noodle-eating event where her father had eaten fourteen plates of Chunyoung, winning the competition, bragging that he could have eaten more. It was undoubtedly by the plates of pickled cabbage called *kimchi*, egg noodles, onion salad, raw garlic and shredded pickled radish sat by some chili-soya paste. Another table was overflowing with *bibimbab*, which was a large bowl of rice, topped with vegetables, meat and egg. Her favorite was the *dolsot bibimbap*, served in a piping hot stone bowl that cooked the rice to a crisp. In the children's dining room, they almost always had *ramyeon* noodles, and she loved the spiciest kind with pork, onions, cucumber and garlic. The most coveted item on the table was the deer brains, a specialty desired by Hai, and served to his most important guests.

A female dancer touched Sook Ja's shoulder, distracting her from the food. She whispered that Ran would have moved the audience to tears had she been allowed to sing the traditional song she practiced earlier in the day, but Hai had requested the performance consist solely of the modern American swing music he so loved. Sook Ja nodded, smiling proudly at her mother, who had finished giving her instructions and was eyeing the doorway. At that moment, a noticeable silence permeated the room.

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